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The Return of Populism — The 2000 Romanian Elections

DURING THE YEARS IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWING THE FALL OF THE Ceausescu regime in 1989, Romania fulfilled the requirements of an 'electoral democracy'.¹ Free and reasonably fair elections regularly produced parliaments (1990, 1992) and governments dominated by the communist successor parties run by Ion Iliescu, a member of the old nomenklatura. Once elected, these institutions operated in principle within the framework of procedural democracy, but in practice often broke the rules and norms accepted in the West as characteristic of liberal democracy. When this occurred public opinion was either too weak, or divided, or simply too indifferent to demand more accountability. Further impoverishment of the poorest citizens due to mismanagement of the economy and rampant corruption contributed to the demise of the post-communist regime in 1996, which in turn led to the hope that with electoral democracy established, the development of democratic institutions and government accountability would follow. Four years later, after the anti-communist coalition, which had been in government in the meantime, was defeated in the November 2000 elections by the indestructible Ion Iliescu and his little changed party (The Party for Social Democracy, PDSR) a question mark hangs over the whole decade of transition and the attempt at transformation. Emil Constantinescu, elected president in 1996 and praised at the time as the only democratic Romanian head of state this century, did not even dare to run again for his permitted second term, fearing a disastrous electoral performance, as predicted by the public opinion polls. The leading party of the coalition, the old National Peasant Christian Democratic party (NPCD) did not even reach the electoral threshold it had itself set earlier in 2000; and the rest of the coalition parties, the old Liberal Party (LP), the Hungarians' Alliance (DAHR), and the Social Democrats (DP) were reduced to about a

¹ The term was coined by Larry Diamond.

quarter of the seats in the 2000 Parliament. The best placed candidate for presidency from the former government coalition could not reach 15 per cent of the votes cast, while the right-winger Corneliu Vadim Tudor emerged as the main challenger to Ion Iliescu. Worse than a defeat for the coalition, this spelled a defeat for politics and political parties and a return to the populist environment of 1990, with its hatred for politicians and parties and a preference for strong leadership. This is the perspective from which I intend to examine the results of the elections.

The 1996 elections changed more in Romanian political life than just the holders of power. The post-elections alliance brought together the winning anti-communist parties' coalition, the Democratic Convention and former Prime Minister Petre Roman's Democratic Party (DP), a splinter group from the 1990 National Salvation Front. This was the first move to end the most important cleavage in Romanian political life, that between the anti-communists and the post-communists. The term post-communist parties is used here to mean parties drawing upon the political elite of the Communist regime for their leadership, upon the ideological and institutional heritage of Communism for their ideology and policy-making, and upon a population defined by residual communist attitudes for their constituency. This clarification is necessary because of the extraordinary circumstances created by the 1989 popular uprising against Ceausescu, which led to the birth of a post-communist political system with no official successor to the Romanian Communist Party (RCP). After Ceausescu's ousting, Ion Iliescu took power with the support of the army and organized a new mass party on the structure of RCP, the National Salvation Front. Later, NSF hardliners sided with him to create the present Party for Social Democracy (PDSR), while the more reform-minded and younger NSF members joined the technocrat Petre Roman's DP. The DP preserved some special post-communist identity after its 1996 alliance with anti-communists: more than once it caused trouble for the coalition which opposed the restitution of property confiscated in Communist times. By early 2000 the coalition existed only on paper, each party pursuing its own interest, often at the expense of the others. But the cleavage was also gone: the public no longer cared about the background of any party, and the parties themselves had changed as regards both ideas and personnel. Leading politicians switched parties in 2000 both within the

coalition or by leaving the coalition parties for the more favoured PDSR.

The electoral disaster could have been predicted by looking at the performance in local elections of coalition members. The Democratic Convention, the 1996 victor, was deserted by the liberals, who accused them of pandering to the National Peasants, the other major coalition member. The latter ran under the banner of the Convention but on their own in local elections, recording the worst performance in the history of the coalition. The liberals lost Bucharest despite recruiting the most popular candidate at the last moment. The Democrats scored well, while PDSR confirmed its lead in the polls, but lost Bucharest in a run-off with a Democratic candidate. The good performance of a 1997 offspring of the PDSR, the Alliance for Romania (ApR) led the Liberals to decide not to resume the banner of the Convention for the legislative elections but to try to build a centrist, more pragmatically-minded coalition with ApR. They initiated negotiations with ApR and announced that they would no longer support President Emil Constantinescu, whose following had fallen to an unprecedented low level in public opinion polls. This decision by the liberals prompted Constantinescu to withdraw.

Formerly head of the Romanian Democratic Convention coalition, but considering himself, perhaps somewhat self-deceptively, as more a representative of civil society, the 'Romanian Havel', Constantinescu first saw his popularity drop dramatically in the aftermath of the 1999 war in Kosovo. It was further damaged by the significant fall in living standards, due to austere budgetary policies in 1999 and 2000. The announcement of his withdrawal shocked both allies and enemies, as his original party, the National Peasants, had no other successor in mind. Constantinescu told Romanians in his dramatic address in July 2000 that he was leaving political life altogether, having no intention to run for parliament or assume the leadership of National Peasants. The reason given was his defeat in the campaign against corruption and the informal networks of the former secret service, the Securitate.

The abrupt retreat of Constantinescu left the space for a candidate better able to muster support, but the parties within the coalition were once again unable to work out a common solution. Constantinescu supported the then Prime Minister, technocrat Mugur Isarescu, but Isarescu had hesitated for months before finally

deciding to run in September 2000. The liberals moved first to assemble a popular team, the front runners in all popularity surveys, Isarescu and former prime minister Teodor Stolojan. In the public mind, Stolojan was remembered as the best prime minister of the post-communist times, despite running only a caretaker government in 1991–92. Afterwards he held a position at the World Bank, then came back to Romania to join the board of a major domestic company, only returning to politics subsequently at the invitation of ApR. However, after the liberals' intervention and Isarescu's refusal to form a team running for president–prime minister, Stolojan accepted the liberals' invitation and became a member of that party and their candidate for the presidency. The projected merger of the liberals with the Alliance for Romania was aborted, since the leader of that party, Teodor Melescanu, was intent on running himself. Mugur Isarescu was persuaded to stand by Constantinescu and the National Peasants and announced, after an anxious wait of two months by his supporters, that he would run as an 'independent'. Former prime minister Petre Roman had all along insisted that he was going to run for the Democratic Party, the social democratic member of the current government coalition, despite enjoying only around 5 per cent support in the popularity surveys. The entrance of the two technocrats modified the race considerably, but not fundamentally. Ion Iliescu retained his comfortable lead, while Melescanu lost his previously held second-rank position and dropped to the level of Roman. The newcomers divided the classic constituency of the Democratic Convention, Isarescu getting in the end only 9 per cent and Stolojan 12 per cent.

The small old-established Social Democrat Party (PSDR), which had been a member of the Convention from 1995, then becoming an ally of Roman's Democratic Party (the alliance had run in 1996 under the banner of Social Democratic Union-USD), decided this time to join forces with Ion Iliescu's PDSR. Its prominent members were granted winnable seats on the party's electoral lists. Despite being an old party, PSDR has not managed in ten years to steal any voters from the post-communist left. The polls show it constantly below the electoral threshold. PSDR would be irrelevant were it not so difficult for the Romanian communist successor parties to win legitimacy in the eyes of Western social democracy. PSDR has a key position in the Socialist International, where it holds a seat from before the Second World War; it helped secure recognition of

Roman's Social Democrats, and is now expected to do the same for Iliescu's party, which has been ostracized for the last nine years. The Socialist International has gently pushed towards reunification of all would-be Social Democrats, an aim frustrated so far by the personal rivalry between Iliescu and Roman.

The National Peasants laboured desperately to assemble a new coalition under the banner of the Convention, which had been deserted by the liberals. They finally recruited four minor political parties, each unable to reach the new 5 per cent electoral threshold (raised from the previous 3 per cent by a government emergency ruling sponsored by NPCD itself in June 2000), and labelled the newly formed coalition CDR 2000. Under the new electoral law which they sponsored, not only has the threshold been raised to 5 per cent, but coalitions have to add 3 points for the second coalition member, then one extra point for each additional new member. In this combination the new CDR 2000 needed 10 per cent of total votes cast to enter parliament – and it managed only 6 per cent as the polls had predicted. The National Peasants became – in part unjustly – the main scapegoats of the public's unfulfilled high expectations of the victors of 1996.

The most controversial party and the only surprise of the elections was, however, Tudor's Greater Romania Party (GRP). A loose collection of retired Securitate and army officers grouped around the charismatic figure of Vadim Tudor, including as a new recruit the popular but fiercely nationalistic Mayor of Cluj Napoca, Gheorghe Funar, GRP took advantage of the collapse of the moderate ApR as the anti-system party and emerged overnight as the only party not tainted by previous participation in government. The political career of Vadim Tudor is an extraordinary one. It started in 1990, when, in a memorable letter addressed to the then prime minister, Petre Roman, this former Ceausescu propagandist and poet applied for a government grant in order to start a weekly magazine, *Greater Romania*, promising that the weekly would slander the opponents of the regime more effectively than the post-communist media already at work. The money was eventually found, although not from Roman, and the group of Ceausescu's propagandists, only a few months after the fall of their protector, was in business again, slandering the opponents of Mr Iliescu, their own enemies and the traditional scapegoats, Jews, Hungarians and other minority groups. Their ideology was close to that of the bulk of

NSF. On 1 June 1990 the first freely-elected, and NSF-dominated, parliament proved this by keeping a moment of silence in the memory of the wartime dictator, Ion Antonescu. *Greater Romania* weekly had already started the rehabilitation campaign for Antonescu, presented as an ancestor of Ceausescu's fight for the independence of Romania from the domination of the Soviet Union. This synthesis of right-wing elements with left-wing ones (*Greater Romania* defended simultaneously the fascist Iron Guard, Antonescu and Ceausescu, while preaching against privatization and the IMF) is very typical of other successors of communist parties in Eastern Europe. The mixture of nationalism and collectivism proved a success, and a lasting one. A year later Vadim also founded the Greater Romania Party and from then on he became the champion of all anti-democratic causes, befriending Milosevic, Saddam Hussein and Jean Marie Le Pen.

Tudor belongs to a group to be feared, Ceausescu's national-communist ideologues. These intellectuals forged the ideology that Ceausescu started to promote in his years of ostentatious independence from the Soviet Union, that put a decisive touch to post-communist transition, surpassing the borders of their party. This ideology mixed such far-right elements as Christian fundamentalism, anti-Semitism and ethnic nationalism with far-left ones, such as praising Communist nationalization and its destruction of the old inter-war democracy. Vadim Tudor openly asked for a coup d'état by the army to end Romanian democracy in 1993, encouraged the rebel coal-miners to attack Bucharest in January 1999 and published a 'black list' of people to be 'terminated' in the event of his achieving power. His entourage is filled with retired generals and he has a support network among active officers as well, which allows him to publish from time to time pieces on his opponents based on the secret files of the Securitate. Indeed in 1997 President Emil Constantinescu claimed that the GRP had its own secret service, formed by a voluntary network of officers in the official services. Due to the ineffectiveness of justice – the usual length of a trial in either criminal or civil courts is between three and six years – and his immunity from prosecution as an MP, Vadim managed to survive through hundreds of legal suits started by various plaintiffs. The power installed in 1996 proved as ineffective in dealing with Vadim and his supporters within the state services as with everything else. In a notorious trial the Minister of Justice failed to prove that Vadim

had libelled him. The Courts tended increasingly to consider libel, a general phenomenon in the Romanian press, as simply another journalistic genre.

The GRP did govern Romania, however, as a minor partner with PDSR from 1994 to 1996 in a larger 'red' coalition, for instance, by packing the Department of Culture with old hands at propaganda from former times. The forceful protest of the United States State Department in particular, an active policy conducted by the then ambassador to Bucharest, Alfred Moses, led to the termination of the alliance on the eve of the 1996 elections. During 2000 as well, as the victory of PDSR by a large margin was predicted by every opinion poll, Western, but especially American diplomats lobbied actively to prevent an alliance between PDSR and GRP in the event of a victory by the former.

THE 2000 CAMPAIGN

The 2000 elections followed the dullest campaign in the history of post-communist Romania. In fact the conflict-driven and highly unprofessional media had long paved the way for a victory by populists, despite last-minute fears of a too decisive victory for the PDSR. The PDSR and Iliescu had constantly criticized the ruling coalition in the past year for using the same doomsday language as most of the media, portraying the current situation in terms such as 'catastrophe', 'national robbery', 'constant decline', 'famine' and even 'genocide'. This drift in the public discourse, only partly justified by the real social and economic developments, strengthened the 'social fear' issues (corruption, dissolution of authority, xenophobia) which were the mainstream campaign themes. Thus the media played into the hands of their natural 'owner', Vadim Tudor. He presented himself as an outsider who opposed both the current and the former rulers and attracted many floating, anti-system voters from the more moderate anti-system party, ApR. Tudor also had by far the most vivid and charismatic TV presence, contrasting with the dull technocrats Stolojan and Isarescu, who proved unable to find a straightforward way to address voters. The poor performance of Stolojan and Isarescu (both ended the electoral campaign with roughly half the scores with which they began) and their obvious unpreparedness for the TV debates only reinforced

the impression of political amateurism and lack of leadership displayed by the democratic right. The little energy they had was spent aiming blows at each other, as they knew that they fought for the same segment of the electorate. In the run-off Iliescu had an easy task to defeat Vadim Tudor, to whom he denied a joint TV debate and who was attacked by virtually all the mainstream media, frightened that in the event of his victory he would carry out his threats to limit the freedom of expression of his fellow journalists.

The Audio-Visual Council, the watchdog of the electronic media, tried to regulate the violently partisan talk-shows and news bulletins by banishing the campaign from regular programmes and pushing it instead into specially designed shows. With results known in advance, the public media were reluctant to challenge either the present government members or the future ones: the outcome was programmes consisting of alternating monologues, with few real debates and the lowest audience figures ever. Only on the eve of elections did the audience share for electoral broadcasts increase a little, when Corneliu Vadim Tudor started to insult his opponents, threatening to put them in gaol or machine-gun them! Turnout at the elections was the lowest of post-communist times, 65 per cent compared to 76 per cent in 1996, and the only news was the unexpected good result achieved by the GRP and Tudor himself (see Table 1).

Table 1

Elections 2000 Romania: The Distribution of Seats among Political Parties

Seats in the 2000 Parliament	Chamber of Deputies (345)	Senate (140)
PDSR	155	65
GRP	84	37
DP	31	13
LP	30	13
Hungarians	27	12
Other Ethnic Minorities	18	–

The PDSR emerged as the winner in these elections despite failing to reach an absolute majority. They scored high among older, rural voters and those who live in the East (Moldova) and South (Muntenia). The renovated CDR alliance, dominated by the National Peasants, did not pass the electoral threshold. Their policy of embracing minor partners proved suicidal, as the latter were not

able to bring CDR enough votes to compensate for raising the threshold. Opinion polls had shown this long before the election. However, as if to confirm once more its drift and lack of strategy, the main partner of the current ruling coalition ran head-on into this electoral disaster. On the other hand, CDR suffered most from the apathy of its traditional supporters. The cacophonous performance of the ruling coalition in Parliament and the inability of the democratic right (NPCD and LP) to put forward a single presidential candidate made even its most loyal supporters unwilling to give credit to the coalition for the economic turnaround of 2000 – perhaps the most successful year economically for Romania in the last decade. The red-brown, xenophobic GRP (actually just an electoral vehicle for its leader) succeeded in surpassing the most optimistic expectations of its supporters, as C. V. Tudor himself admitted. Most polls had placed GRP and its presidential candidate at around 15 per cent one week before the elections, although the trend was upwards in the last days. (Votes to be redistributed were more numerous than ever before, due to raising the electoral threshold to 5 per cent, and the failure of CDR to enter Parliament. This favoured the main winners, PDSR and GRP, and increased their gains in seats.)

A FAILED TRANSITION

The explanation for success on the part of the PDSR, which campaigned with no programme except general slogans on the lines that it would eradicate poverty, is twofold. On one hand we have important circumstantial causes: the management of the coalition and the electoral campaign strategy fall into this category. The continuous squabbles within the government coalition have created frequent gridlocks in the past four years, prompting Romanians to overwhelmingly declare in public opinion surveys that they prefer a government made of experts, not politicians, and of one party, not a coalition. The vote for the strongest party became a 'rational' vote for people disappointed with the ability of the parties to govern in a coalition. But the massive return of the people to either moderate (Iliescu) or radical populist (Vadim Tudor) leaders is rooted in deeper and less immediate causes. Some explanations stem from the mass political culture of the Romanians after

Communism; others, in the management of the transition and its impact on post-communist Romanian society. We shall examine them in turn.

The Romanians' disenchantment with politics may well be attributed to a failed economic transition. The year 2000 was the first to bring modest economic growth (less than 2 per cent) after years of decline, but with all-important inflation of 40 per cent still raging. The purchasing power of Romanians is less than 50 per cent compared to 1989, which prompts majority agreement in polls with the statement that economic life was better during the Ceausescu regime. The victory of 1996 was split among the many small parties of the anti-communist opposition which afterwards had great difficulty in providing a unitary and coherent government. The most serious cleavage separated the traditional old parties from Petre Roman's Social Democrats, a splinter group from Iliescu's 1990 National Salvation Front. The attempts by old parties to restore property confiscated by the Communist regime were constantly and effectively opposed by Social Democrats, afraid that they would alienate their constituency. After four years in government the CDR left its main electoral promise – the regulation of property rights – still largely unfulfilled. Despite efforts, mainly in response to demands by the National Peasants, to speed up privatization, the overall low appeal of the Romanian business environment to foreign investment, combined with the complicated regulatory framework of privatization adopted in the early 1990s, led to the resilience of state property in about two-thirds of the economy. Meanwhile the small private sector has gradually become responsible for most of the GDP.

The failure of the economic transition is not due entirely to the mismanagement of various governments, although both post-communists and anti-communists proved highly incompetent in running the economy; but some blame must lie with the exceptionally rigid constraints which were a legacy of the Ceausescu era. Unlike its Central European neighbours, in 1989 Romania had no private property to speak of, a heavy industry developed by Communist planning and not organically, and the deepest penetration of society by the Communist regime. Of adult Romanians 31 per cent had been party members, double the regional mean (14), and more than three times higher than the figure for Poland or Hungary; and one Romanian in seven worked as an

informant for Ceausescu's feared secret service, the Securitate. Since most of the recruiting took place among the most educated, the direct outcome is reflected in the lack of an alternative elite to the Communist one after 1990. The traditional parties were even more deeply afflicted by this lack of well-trained experts and staff and relied heavily on former political prisoners or their descendants, thus further narrowing their recruitment area. After 1996 the small non-governmental sector was crippled by the massive transfer of skilled staff and experts to the government, in order to fill positions where political parties had not enough human resources. While extremely weak in terms of human resources or production of policies, the political parties were very assertive in putting a firm grip on government: a 1998 law for organization of the government established that superior positions could no longer be filled by anyone not belonging to a political party. This only led to massive but superficial recruitment as many specialists accepted enrolment in a party in order to get or keep a government job. Political positions thus defined were then split among coalition member parties based on the percentage of their representation in Parliament. The best outcome of this Balkan try at consociational democracy was the equitable participation in government for the first time of the Hungarian minority, as Hungarians filled not only local government positions, but 7 per cent of positions in central government as well. This led to an unprecedented *détente* in the relations with Hungarians, consolidated the position of moderate Hungarian leaders over DAHR and erased the nationality issue from the electoral campaign for the first time in ten years. Tudor himself directed his rhetoric against corruption among the political class this time, since this was by far the most appealing message in the 2000 campaign.

The factors determining management of the transition were significant in view of the firm retention of power by post-communists. It becomes clear that the 1996 victory of anti-communist parties came too late and was too incomplete to effect redesign of the transition blueprint created by PC parties. Despite their victory, anti-communists did not win an absolute majority; they therefore had to ally with DP, and as a result restitution of property came to a standstill. They also lacked experience of government and sufficient qualified staff to replace the resilient old bureaucracy left over from Communist times. What is this blue-

print, which makes all the difference between first-wave applicants to the European Union, and a laggard country like Romania? And what kind of society has it created in the end? Some of its defining features are listed below.

i. Absence of decommunization, which led to the survival of Communist formal and informal networks and provided Communism with retrospective legitimacy. After a decade of transition Romania is still the country where Communism not only was never put on trial, but also survived as a legitimate doctrine, often putting its own traditional enemies on trial instead. Unlike Bulgaria, Romania has never passed a law to rid the civil service of Communist-era bureaucrats, nor did it cleanse society of former Securitate informants. When a law for screening former Securitate files (which allowed citizens to access their own files but did not banish former collaborators from public positions) was passed in December 1999 it was already too late. Most of the targets of such a law had already won the battle for economic and political power. Former Communist elites control most of the formal and the informal economy, the new private media included. The press is still dominated in an authoritarian fashion by former Securitate agents and national-communist ideology.² Apart from the economy and freedom of expression, the absence of decommunization affected the legal culture and the moral health of the society in general, as people perceived that no justice was possible. Stalinist torturers, December 1989 terrorists and vigilante miners were still at large. In January 1999 the miners besieged Bucharest and, after defeating the police, were finally stopped by the government and the army with a mixture of threats and promises. The event, broadcast extensively by BBC, CNN and every European channel, showed the whole world how frail the administration installed in November 1996 really was. The assault was led by GRP members, and it was reported that the miners defeated the riot police in their first confrontations due to the fact they had better communication equipment, meaning plenty of mobile phones, while the police used an outdated radio station. Except for a few miners' leaders who were fined, no one was ever charged with this assault on the democratic foundations of the state.

² See for further details my review of Romanian press coverage of the Kosovo war in Alina Mungiu-Pippidi, 'The War that Never Was', *East European Constitutional Review* (Summer 1999).

ii. *The control of the transition, notably of the transfer of property by means of a conservative economic policy, meant to preserve and subsidize the state property.* The principal factor in the Romanian transition was not the creation of the market economy. For the post-communist political class it was the control of the transformation, mainly of the privatization process, which mattered most. In this way its members achieved two important objectives: preservation of a mass constituent basis in the state sector and accumulation of private assets in the hands of their political clientele. Even as late as 1998 Iliescu's main condition endorsing the government's budget was the slowing down of privatization and its control by the Audit Court. The Court, whose president, like most important figures of the judiciary, had been appointed and granted tenure in the Iliescu era, even tried as late as 1997 to interfere with the process of determining the right price of assets to be privatized, in a pure Communist manner.

iii. *The creation of a political system with low accountability of both the government and Parliament and a weak judiciary.* Due both to constitutional rules and organic laws, the system suffers most from the lack of accountability. Elections on party lists and frequent defections of MPs from one party to another, with total disregard of the mandate given by the voters, made Parliament the most unpopular public institution. The 1996 Parliament fought to give up the immunity of MPs, but to no avail. The Constitution grants immunity to MPs regardless of the nature of the offence, political or criminal, and Parliament's own regulations make the lifting of the immunity almost impossible: only twice, in the case of Vadim Tudor and of a PDSR MP who embezzled and bankrupted a central state bank, did MPs succeed in stripping a fellow MP of his immunity. The judiciary, dominated by Communist magistrates, also proved resistant to attempts at reform. Experience measured in years of practice was embedded in the new laws as the main criterion for being a member of all influential judicial bodies – so magistrates from the Communist era dominate the judiciary. This explains in part why the campaign against corruption launched by Emil Constantinescu from 1997 did not achieve very much. It is also true that those in power from 1996 onwards had little understanding of institutions and little will to reform them: the limited progress they achieved was in the main initiated by a gentle push from the European Commission. They lacked the expertise and the will power

to adjust the institutions to their needs, and they shared the delusion that replacing Iliescu's people with their own nominees – often relatives and others in whom they had complete trust, is enough to achieve change. By 1999 Constantinescu had the courage to put it plainly in a memorable statement: 'We won the elections, but not the power.' To the last, however, he remained as incapable as the rest of the coalition leaders of understanding that their amateurish approach to the reform of institutions was as much to blame as the fierce resistance to change on the part of the public administration, corrupted media and business circles.

There is one further explanation needed to complete the picture: the inadequate support given by the West to the Romanian leaders elected in 1996. Romania was not invited to join the North Atlantic Alliance in 1997 despite intensive efforts at persuasion by Emil Constantinescu and Jacques Chirac, the French President. The Kosovo war caused significant losses to the Romanian economy, due mostly to the embargo on the Danube traffic; the bombing of Serbia, a traditional ally and a Christian Orthodox neighbour country, was highly unpopular in Romania. Romanians identified strongly with Serbs and resented the Western involvement in the defence of Albanians, speculating that a similar offensive might one day involve Transylvania, where a two-million strong Hungarian community still resides. They would, however, have accepted Constantinescu's strong endorsement of NATO had this policy boosted living standards. Instead in 1999 the government was forced to pay foreign debts contracted by the PDSR government in 1994–95 in order to avoid bankruptcy: practically each Romanian contributed almost a quarter of his or her personal income in 1999 in order to pay the debt. This was an effort similar to that demanded by Ceausescu in his last years, even if this time the method employed was different: keeping wages in the public sector well below inflation. By the beginning of 2000, despite the fact that Romania received a formal invitation to join the EU at the December 1999 Helsinki summit, Constantinescu had become a loser in the eyes of most Romanians. He was seen as a politician who had betrayed traditional alliances and friendship but was nevertheless still treated no better by the West than Iliescu had been in his time. The year 2000, despite the boosting of exports and a return to growth, recorded the lowest rate of direct foreign investment for recent years. Now convinced that Romania must stand alone, Romanians decided that it was old

hand Ion Iliescu, not amateur Constantinescu, who could make the most of scarce domestic resources.

THE ROOTS OF POPULISM

Repeated surveys have shown that the majority of Romanian voters was discontented with the current government coalition and with the political system as a whole.³ For the first time since 1990, no politician managed to score positive on the scale between trust and distrust. Current politicians are also perceived as less competent and honest than Communist leaders: overall they are seen as worse on all counts except for being 'richer' and 'better speakers'. The responsibility for a failed transition is attributed by an overwhelming majority to politicians: 17 per cent blame either post-communist parties or old parties, while 52 per cent of respondents blame 'the whole political class'. Altogether there is a large majority blaming the failure of transition on the political elite, rather than on the legacy of communism, the insufficient support from the West or the various groups opposed to reform. Trust in state institutions is extremely low, local governments being the only institutions perceived by a majority as serving the public interest, despite the perception that corruption is widespread in the whole public sector. Romanians are not anti-democrats, however, as a large majority endorses the idea that 'democracy is the best form of government, despite its shortcomings' (71 per cent) and rejects all undemocratic alternatives, from presidential rule to army rule. The vast majority of the respondents in our survey denied any role of the left-right dichotomy in their electoral choice. About 30 per cent of the total sample was able to attribute correctly the 'left' or 'right' labels to four major political statements tested, but on most policy issues tested, a lot fewer than that could attribute various policies to the rival parties associated with them. The overwhelming concern is

³All the surveys quoted were carried out in 2000 by the Centre for Urban Sociology (CURS), the partner polling institute of the Romanian Academic Society. These analyses are based on the electoral forecasts and polls released by the Romanian Academic Society's Centre for Political Communication run by the present writer. Besides the surveys quoted individually the analysis is based on a two-wave panel survey designed by the Centre for Political Communication and conducted by CURS in the first and last week of the electoral campaign.

for an improvement in the living standards in the near future and the main reason of the vote for PDSR is people's belief that a strong party can run things, unlike an unstable and divided coalition. A majority believes that property nationalized or confiscated by the Communists should be returned to the rightful owners; but since the coalition was unable to keep its promise to enforce property restitution and most people do not fall into the 'owners' category, this general support for property restitution is largely inconsequential. Most of the voters for Iliescu are drawn from state television's viewers, just as in old times. The majority of the constituency, despite denying any ideological affinity, is however strongly collectivist: 68 per cent consider Communism was a good idea badly put into practice, and 78 per cent consider that the state should support loss-making state industry.

The most popular solution to this striking lack of accountability of the political elite is the dismantling of the current political system and choice of a new one, closer to more direct forms of democracy. Romanians endorse a change in the electoral system so as dispense with voting on party lists (77 per cent); they want to reduce Parliament to only one Chamber (71 per cent), as only 8 per cent consider that 'MPs work in the public interest'. A large majority is in favour of having the government submit important bills to a referendum and to give up any unpopular policies. It would, however, be a mistake to assume that the public's discontent with the political class and its penchant for more popular participation is entirely rationally grounded; neither is populism only another face of post-totalitarian authoritarianism. Explanatory models of the most populist voters⁴ show that older people with a lower level of education and political competence (reading political news reports and watching political shows less) tend to be more populist when controlling for wealth. In other words, those who say that they are keen on participating more are the people who are less interested in politics and the least

⁴ We built a factor score by principal component analysis from the self-assessed preference for i) majority system with one candidate against proportional with party list; ii) organizing a popular vote on every important policy of the government; iii) governing only in accordance with the public opinion as expressed in the polls. We used the resulting factor as a dependent variable that we tried to explain. The explanatory power of the variables tested as predictors was compared according to the amount of variance when tested separately by adding them to a basic social status model. The database comes from a March 2000 survey.

competent. The negative evaluations of Parliament, the courts and the government turned out to be determinants of the populist factor, but failed to give much explanation for the total variance. The more people are dissatisfied with courts, parliaments and governments, the more they want referendums, poll-driven policies and majority systems. Frustration factors were by far the most powerful in explaining the populism factor. Perception of generalized corruption in the public sector and agreement with the statement 'the same people enjoy privileges as during communism' explain more than all the other factors added together. We did not find populism to be firmly linked to undemocratic attitudes, but some propensity to favour strong rule is associated with the preference for direct democracy and majority systems. The performance of the institutions matters, and since the performance does not live up to the expectations of the people and does not match the difficulty of the tasks, people turn away from representative democracy, searching for a more accountable system. The main reason for this switch, however, is that life for individuals is highly frustrating during transition: some people do better than others, and it seems that this inequality is harder to stomach than the shared negative experience of Communism. People also feel that corruption is more widespread than during Communist times and that is the decisive factor for a preference for another political system.

I left this major factor to the last and recorded it under the 'frustration' hypothesis, so that it is shown to be more subjective than objective, for important reasons. If one looks at the New Democracies Barometer (NDB) figures in all post-communist countries, one cannot but be impressed by the unanimous perception that corruption increased after Communism. How well-grounded is that perception? Are people so overwhelmed by the visibility of large sums of money and luxury displays that they forget that nothing could be obtained legally under Communism, except by bribery or some other means of exerting influence? It is true that bribes were more moderate, that a sort of barter of favours worked; that in many cases gifts, and not money, and gifts consisting of items in short supply were then the norm, compared to the very visible Mercedes cars of the transition. But the fact remains that corruption in this mild form was generalized then, not now. Having this in mind we examined the perception of corruption separately in order to check for its objectivity.

As in the above populism model, we grouped explanatory variables in a few factors. Hypothesis 1 predicted that people will perceive more corruption if they have a higher level of media consumption. After all, this is the main difference between Communist and post-communist times: the corruption is now publicized. Hypothesis 2 expressed our doubts predicting that people are the more inclined to perceive generalized corruption, as they are more authoritarian-minded, that is, paranoiac in essence. We adapted for use as a proxy for authoritarianism a classic statement from 'The Authoritarian Personality' questionnaire saying that 'there are minority groups which pose a threat to sovereignty and stability of our country'. Hypothesis 3 predicted that the more demanding and competent civically people were, the more dissatisfied with the public administration they would be and the more corruption they would perceive. Finally, from the angle of social capital theory we predicted that people would be more likely to perceive generalized corruption if they were predisposed to a low level of trust in general. Obviously hypothesis 4 was complementary to hypothesis 2.

The results showed these two hypotheses to be right. Perception of corruption is indeed highly subjective. More competent citizens do not perceive corruption as generalized, but rather as moderate. Subjective corruption is also not influenced by higher media exposure, but by a predisposition to distrust and authoritarianism. Or is it that we mistook the sense of causality, and in fact it is the perception of corruption which determines distrust in the administration? It would be only logical. In order to rule this out we ran a two-stage least square model (TSLS) and it turned out that public sector trust stands as a predictor of subjective corruption, but not the other way round. So we were right to categorize perception of corruption among frustration factors. It is one's frustration with the stress of the transition, manifested less in the objective indicators of one's economic standing but in the subjective comparison with others' performance that predominates in creating an attitude of rejection of the current political system and the desire to bring about a radical change. This correlates with the low political competence of those involved. Here lies the true explanation for Vadim Tudor's and Iliescu's success and the main fear for the future. If the new regime proves as unable to deal with this resentment as it was before, or as the former coalition was, if some successful strategy to bring about more social cohesion is not developed and

social envy remains the main feeling generated by the transition, the new Romanian democracy may further deteriorate.

DETERMINANTS OF THE MASS APPEAL OF ION ILIESCU AND HIS PARTY

Eleven years after the flight of Ceausescu, Ion Iliescu is perhaps the most influential character of the East European transition. In no other country had a politician succeeded in winning three terms as president. This success deserves a separate explanation. Despite his skilful manipulation of circumstances, Ion Iliescu could never have succeeded in dominating the Romanian transition had he not enjoyed important popular support. Had Romanians desired Securitate files to be opened, light to be shed on the truth about the Ceausescu era, the Revolution and the violent June 1990, no power in the world would have been able to prevent it, once free elections had been instituted and private media allowed to function. Obviously, putting Communism behind was not on the agenda of the majority of Romanians, as was a quiet, peaceful and moderately prosperous life. Or, in other words, it is exactly this mediocre, materialist ideal that Mr Iliescu embodies. In focus groups Romanian peasants, who still make up half of the Romanian population, have always designated him an ideal leader.⁵ Not even a last-minute scandal on dirty money used for his campaign in 1996, and investigated by French justice, managed to damage him.

Ten years after his spectacular victory of May 1990 when he gathered 83 per cent of the vote, trust in Ion Iliescu still accounts for most of the variance in explanatory models of the vote for PDSR. The reasons for this tremendous popularity, which makes him ten years after the Revolution still the most popular Romanian politician, must be looked for in his personality, beyond his capitalization on the political change of December 1989. His profile as a moderate and a 'good' apparatchik was appealing. Indeed as late as the year 2000 Romanians preferred Communist leaders to current leaders, who are seen as inferior on almost all accounts. Denouncing Iliescu

⁵ This argument was discussed at length in my book on the Romanian political culture after Communism: Alina Mungiu-Pippidi, *Die Rumänen nach '89*, Resita, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Verlag, 1996.

as a Communist, as the old parties and the new press have done for years, was a pure waste of time, as Romanians liked exactly his specific quality as a 'good' Communist, an administrator and not a politician. Besides the personal appeal of Ion Iliescu, it is obvious that the residual Communist attitudes described above are the main explanation for the enduring support during the transition years for the post-communist parties. Despite the many frictions and splits among and within PC parties, support for the collectivist nationalism, which most of the PC ideology consists of, remained a constant during the years of transition.

In multivariate analysis, with the vote for PDSR being the dependent variable, many of these intuitions are verified. In multiple logistic regression models,⁶ the determinants of the vote for PDSR range in the following categories:

1. *Social structure factors*

When trust in Ion Iliescu, the most powerful predictor, is removed from the model, PDSR voters are more likely to reside in villages, have a lower education level and belong to the age-group 50–65 (which is old in Romanian terms, life expectancy being 67). Village residence is the most powerful predictor of status items. Wealth does not matter.

2. *Socialization factors*

People who vote PDSR consider Communism to be the Romanian golden age of the last century. They also believe that Communism is a good idea badly put into practice, and blame the failed transition not on PC parties, not even on the heritage of Communism, but on the anti-communist parties, which governed only from 1996 and only within a coalition with Hungarians and PD. They are also less politically competent, read fewer political reports in newspapers, watch less politics on TV and overall display less interest in politics. They are nostalgic for Communism and the people most resistant to change. They are also the most affected by it, at least at the subjective level, as they feel they are faring much worse than under Communism.

⁶ Based on a March 2000 Freedom House sponsored survey by the Romanian Academic Society and CURS. We used a probability sample of 1,237 respondents selected from age 18 and a multi-stage random cluster design with administrative units stratified regionally.

3. *Political identity factors*

Few PDSR voters have a clear political identity. PDSR is drawing upon the overall 15 per cent who place themselves on the left or centre-left, and on many others who cannot declare some ideological identity. *Socialist and nationalist attitudes, in fact collectivism and xenophobia define the political identity of PC voters.* The definition for xenophobic nationalism, the only nationalism variable that turned out to be a predictor, was phrased as 'Foreign organizations such as EU or the IMF should not tell Romanians how to run their own country'. In short, political identity of the PC voter is overwhelmingly 'peasant' and 'rural' and not 'proletarian' and 'urban' as one would expect after 50 years of Communism. Residual Communism is stored in the poor countryside, at the level of the rural population, structurally predisposed to distrust, *étatisme* and social envy, features reinforced by Communist socialization.

4. *Trust in leaders*

Trust in Ion Iliescu and distrust in pro-Western leaders explains most of the variance. This does not diminish the importance of the political identity and socialization factors, which account also for the leaders' preference.

What makes the difference between Iliescu's and Tudor's constituencies? In many respects their voters are similar, sharing both collectivism and xenophobia. Besides his classical constituency of current and retired army personnel and former secret service informants, Tudor has recently made important gains in the urban areas. Multiple regression models on the vote as expressed in the exit poll by CURS⁷ show that Tudor is equally endorsed by every age group except the oldest (supporters of Ion Iliescu), male, residing in relatively prosperous areas, and moderately educated, especially graduates of vocational schools. He did not receive the votes of intellectuals and entrepreneurs, but rather of the unemployed and the poor in small towns. In other words, Tudor is the favourite candidate of the poor in better-off regions, of the urban neighbourhoods created by the command economy and bankrupted by transition. These people feel strongly that they have 'lost the

⁷The exit poll by CURS was commissioned and broadcast by PROTV, a major TV network. The sample was representative for the constituency, consisting of 15,000 adults over 18 years of age and predicted with a low margin of error (1.8%) the results of the counted vote.

transition' (despite the fact that in objective terms Tudor's voters are richer than Iliescu's). Members of this group are endorsing most of Tudor's conspiracy theories and his general paranoiac political outlook, for instance blaming the West and the ethnic minorities for Romania's troubles.

WHAT COMES NEXT?

Party vice-president Adrian Nastase, the leader of PDSR's moderate wing, was appointed by Ion Iliescu as the new prime minister and he made clear that he would not seek any political alliance but rather govern as a minority government. Nastase, a man in his forties, is said to be more urbane and Western-oriented than the average PDSR politician, but more than once in the past he did not hesitate to engage in nationalist rhetoric when it suited him. He publicly rejected the support offered by GRP and turned to the parties of the former coalition which now possess only a quarter of the seats: the Liberals, the Democrats and the Hungarians. These new opposition parties agreed to support the Nastase government, provided that it stood by the National Strategy for European Integration agreed with Brussels in 2000, after Romania had been invited to join the EU at the Helsinki summit. The opposition leaders endorsed Mr Iliescu in the second round of the presidential elections. Liberals and Hungarians agreed not to provoke a no-confidence vote in the first year of the Nastase cabinet in exchange for keeping their share of positions in the public administration. Members of the cabinet that Mr Nastase announced are rather bad news: most of them had been part of Iliescu's power establishment in 1990–96, except the Labour Minister, Alexandru Athanasiu, a new recruit from PSDR, and Foreign Affairs Minister Mircea Geoana, a former ambassador to Washington. The new government was endorsed by Parliament with relative ease. It is expected that Mr Nastase will promote younger people after the winter 2001 Congress of PDSR which will elect him as party leader. According to the Romanian Constitution, the president cannot be a member of any party, so Mr Iliescu lost his chairmanship of PDSR when elected.

The 2000 elections proved that populism is still, in an economic environment characterized by recession and a social climate characterized by lack of cohesion, a lot stronger than traditional

ideologies. The winner, Mr Iliescu, is a moderate populist and a democrat convert. The second most popular leader, Vadim Tudor, is a radical populist and a nationalist; but otherwise little separates their constituencies.

The elections proved once again that the main successor party to the Communists, PDSR, remains the strongest in Romania despite its defeat in the 1996 elections. At least in public statements, however, PDSR is committed to European integration. It was during its 1992–96 government that Romania applied for EU membership and signed the association agreement. Its MPs answer in surveys that EU integration will benefit Romania and, unlike their constituents, concede that the EU has the right to interfere in Romanian domestic affairs.⁸ After Romania had received the invitation to become a full member at Helsinki in 1999, PDSR declared its support for the framework integration strategy document. This does not mean, however, that it gave up its old ways: while becoming an EU associate member in 1994–96 it heavily subsidized the bankrupt state sector, borrowing from the state banks for its clientele, thus leaving them on the verge of bankruptcy, and slowed down privatization. Can EU integration succeed in a country where the government refuses both economic and political decommunization? The next few years will provide an answer to that, but one thing is clear: the return to power of post-communist parties and leaders is one more obstacle to the already painful and seemingly endless Romanian transition.

⁸ Poll by SAR-CURS in the Romanian Parliament, May 2000.